USDA United States Department of Agriculture | Forest Service | Fort Pierre National Grassland
Fort Pierre Ranger District | 1020 North Deadwood Street
Fort Pierre, SD 57532
605-224-5517

File Code: 1950
Date: August 31, 2020

Dear Interested Party,

This is the scoping letter for the **Prairie Restoration Research Project** on the Fort Pierre Ranger District in central South Dakota. This project proposes: 1) studying the effectiveness of prairie restoration techniques, and 2) producing forb seed for future restoration efforts.

This letter marks the beginning of this project's National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) phase. I am inviting your participation. The Interdisciplinary Team and I will use input received during this "scoping period" to help finalize the: purpose and need, proposed action, alternative actions, and key issues.

To provide input, or for more information, contact Ruben Mares by email at: ruben.mares@usda.gov or by phone at: (605) 224-5517 (office) or (308) 636-6369 (cell). You can also write to: Ruben Mares, Fort Pierre Ranger District, 1020 N. Deadwood St., Ft. Pierre, SD 57532.

Comments received in response to this scoping letter, including the names and addresses of those who comment, will be part of the public record. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, anonymous comments will not provide us with the information needed to provide the respondent with subsequent project information. To be most helpful, your scoping comments should be received by us on or before: **September 30, 2020**.

PROJECT AREA:

The Fort Pierre National Grassland encompasses 116,000 acres of mixed-grass prairie. Proposed treatments would occur on approximately 6,300 acres of National Forest System land at the locations indicated in **Figure 1**. Those sites are designated as Management Area 6.1 ("Rangeland with Broad Resource Emphasis") in our Land and Resource Management Plan[1], with the exception of Richland Dam (513 acres) and Sheriff Dam (91 acres). Richland Dam and Sheriff Dam (**Figures 2 and 3**) are designated as Management Area 3.64 ("Special Plant and Wildlife Habitat").

DRAFT PURPOSE & NEED STATEMENT:

Monitoring has shown that approximately one-third of the Fort Pierre National Grassland is now dominated by invasive, cool-season exotic grasses, particularly smooth brome and Kentucky bluegrass. This increase has been at the expense of native prairie vegetation. Management actions such as burning, applying herbicides, targeted spring grazing, mowing, and tilling have been used to restore native prairie vegetation elsewhere in the Northern Great Plains, but with mixed success. The lack of locally-sourced forb seeds has limited previous restoration efforts on the Fort Pierre National Grassland.

The purpose of this project is to identify which prairie restoration techniques work best on the Fort Pierre National Grassland and to produce forb seed to contribute to restoration efforts there. This project is needed due to the unwanted, rapid increase in non-native grasses.

DRAFT PROPOSED ACTION:

- Authorize use of prairie restoration activities, including application of herbicides, mowing, prescribed burning, seeding, and tillage at the locations indicated on **Figures 2 and 3**.
- Authorize establishment of native forb seed "production areas" (see **Figures 2 & 3** for locations). Species cultivated would vary, but would emphasize those for which local ecotype seed is not otherwise readily available. Tillage and herbicides might be used within the "production areas".
- Authorize prescribed burning and spring (April 1 to June 15) grazing of up to 2,500 animal unit months (AUM); see **Figures 4-9** for locations. Authorize additional, temporary fences and water facilities necessary to manage that additional grazing (the temporary fences and water facilities would be in addition to the permanent fences and water facilities shown in **Figures 4-9**).

BACKGROUND:

The increasing extent of exotic cool-season grasses on the Fort Pierre National Grassland has been of concern for many years. In September 2018 the Central South Dakota Cooperative Grazing District (CSDCGD) requested that investigation be made of techniques to reduce that infestation. Potential approaches were discussed with grazing permittees, grassland managers, prairie restorationists, and researchers. An extensive review was also made of the available scientific literature. After initial field surveys in 2019, a formal letter was sent to all grazing permittees in January 2020 asking for interested parties. Based on that response, additional field surveys were conducted by Fort Pierre Ranger District staff to select the initial study sites shown in **Figures 4-9**. Selection criteria included: 1) response to the January 2020 letter, 2) suitability for prescribed burning (including topography, proximity to residences,

proximity to prairie dog colonies where expansion is not desired, etc.), 3) suitability of existing range infrastructure to manage desired stocking rates, 4) ease of installing temporary range infrastructure if existing infrastructure is inadequate, 5) existing vegetation composition (we are targeting pastures with a sufficient mix of native and exotic grasses), and 6) commitment and willingness of grazing permittee to follow research protocol and to install any necessary temporary range infrastructure.

POTENTIAL ISSUES:

Some information on potential issues is already known to me. That information can be summarized as follows:

- **HERITAGE** – National Historic Preservation Act Section 106 compliance and consultation will be phased, in accordance with our Programmatic agreement[2] with the South Dakota State Historic Preservation Officer and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. Cultural resource inventories and consultation will occur as various phases of this project are developed. Current heritage data indicates that twenty-eight cultural resource inventories were conducted at potential project sites between 1978 and present. No known prehistoric sites or traditional cultural places exist within the proposed project locations. Known cultural resources include 10 historic sites. The historic sites consist of depressions, artifact scatters, dumps, dams, and a wagon road. Of these historic sites, six are not eligible and four are currently unevaluated for the National Register of Historic Places.

- **LIVESTOCK GRAZING** – This project would authorize the use of up to 2,500 AUM of forage. This would be in addition to the 51,549 AUM already authorized across the Fort Pierre National Grassland.

- **PRESCRIBED BURNING** – Prescribed burning on the Fort Pierre National Grassland has been controversial. Concerns have included potential threats to neighboring properties if burns escape their containment lines.

- **RECREATION** –Richland and Sheriff Dams are used by day visitors (especially fisherfolk) and dispersed campers. No treatments are proposed for the areas most heavily used by those recreationists (see **Figures 2 and 3**).

- **SOIL/WATER** –Tillage and herbicide treatments would be located >100 horizontal feet from, and at least 10 vertical feet above the closest high-water mark of any surface water. All herbicide labels would be followed.

- **VEGETATION** – There are no sensitive plants on the Fort Pierre National Grassland. The project area still contains some native grasses and forbs, but it is increasingly dominated by exotic grasses, especially smooth brome and

Kentucky bluegrass. Scattered trees, most commonly Eastern red cedar, also occur.

- **WILDLIFE** – No threatened or endangered species occur in the project area. Several sensitive wildlife species make at least occasional use of the project area.

PUBLIC FORUM:

If you would be interested in participating in a public forum, such as a conference call, on this project, please inform Ruben Mares (see page 1 of this letter for his contact information). Please provide your contact information and specify whether you would prefer such a forum during the scoping period or after the environmental analysis was completed. A face-to-face meeting will not be offered at this time due to pandemic concerns.

Please note that this project will be subject to the objection provisions outlined in Subparts A and B of 36 CFR 218.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

DAN SVINGEN
District Ranger/Capitol City Coordinator

[1] USDA Forest Service. 2009. Land and resource management plan, Nebraska National Forest and associated units. USDA Forest Service. Available at www.fs.fed.us/ngp.

[2] Van Every, M., J. Isaacs, J. D. Vogt, and A. Jorjani. 2019. Programmatic agreement among the Black Hills National Forest, the Nebraska National Forests and Grasslands, South Dakota State Historic Preservation Officer, and Advisory Council on Historic Preservation regarding the process for compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act for undertakings administered by the Black Hills National Forest and the Nebraska National Forests and Grasslands in South Dakota. USDA Forest Service. 18 pp. + appendices.

Figure 1. Map of the Fort Pierre National Grassland showing distribution of proposed treatment sites for the Prairie Restoration Research Project. Figure by Ruben Mares.

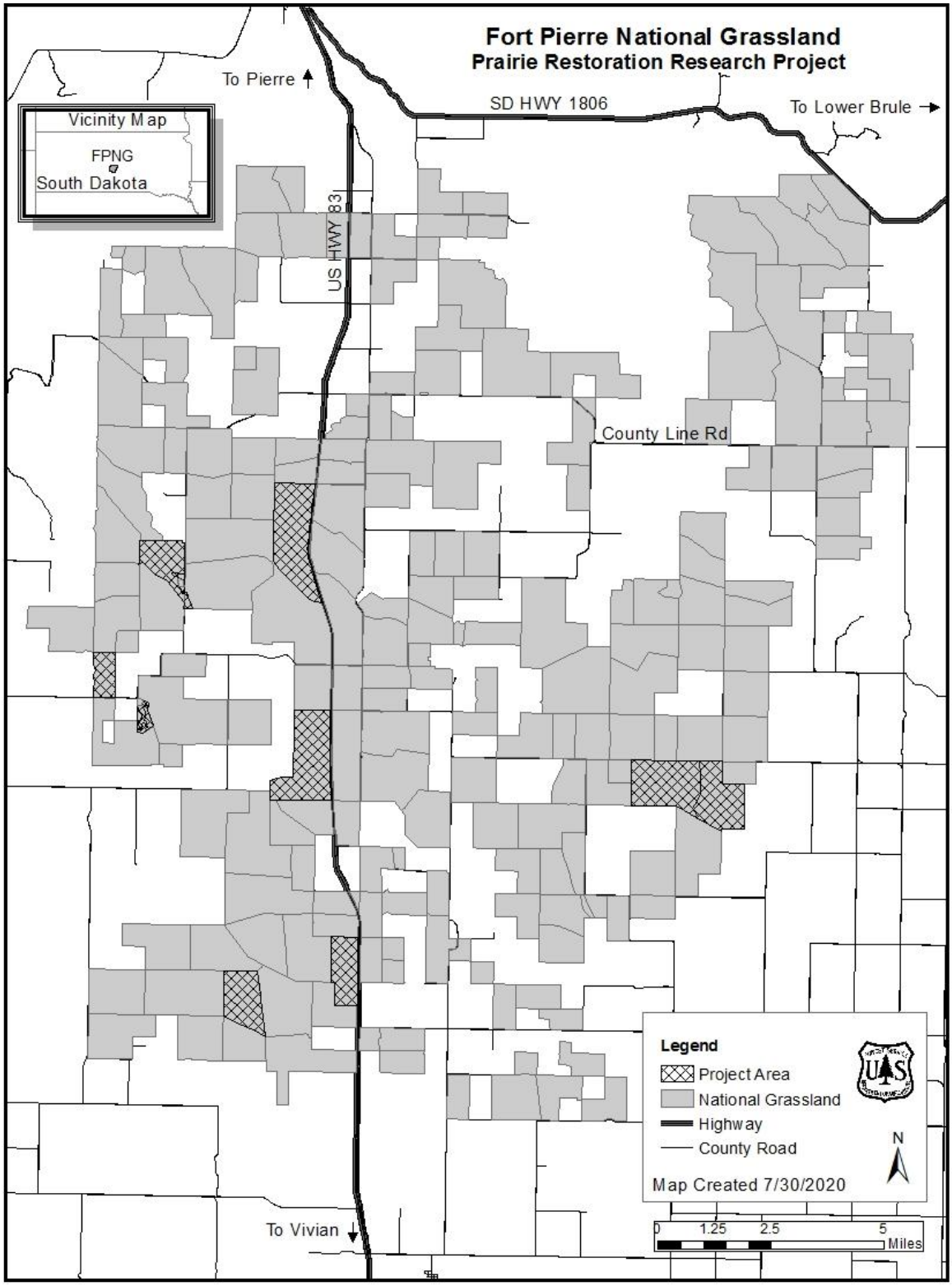

Figure 2. Map of proposed treatments at the Richland Dam Site of the Prairie Restoration Research Project, Fort Pierre National Grassland, Jones County, South Dakota. Figure by Ruben Mares.

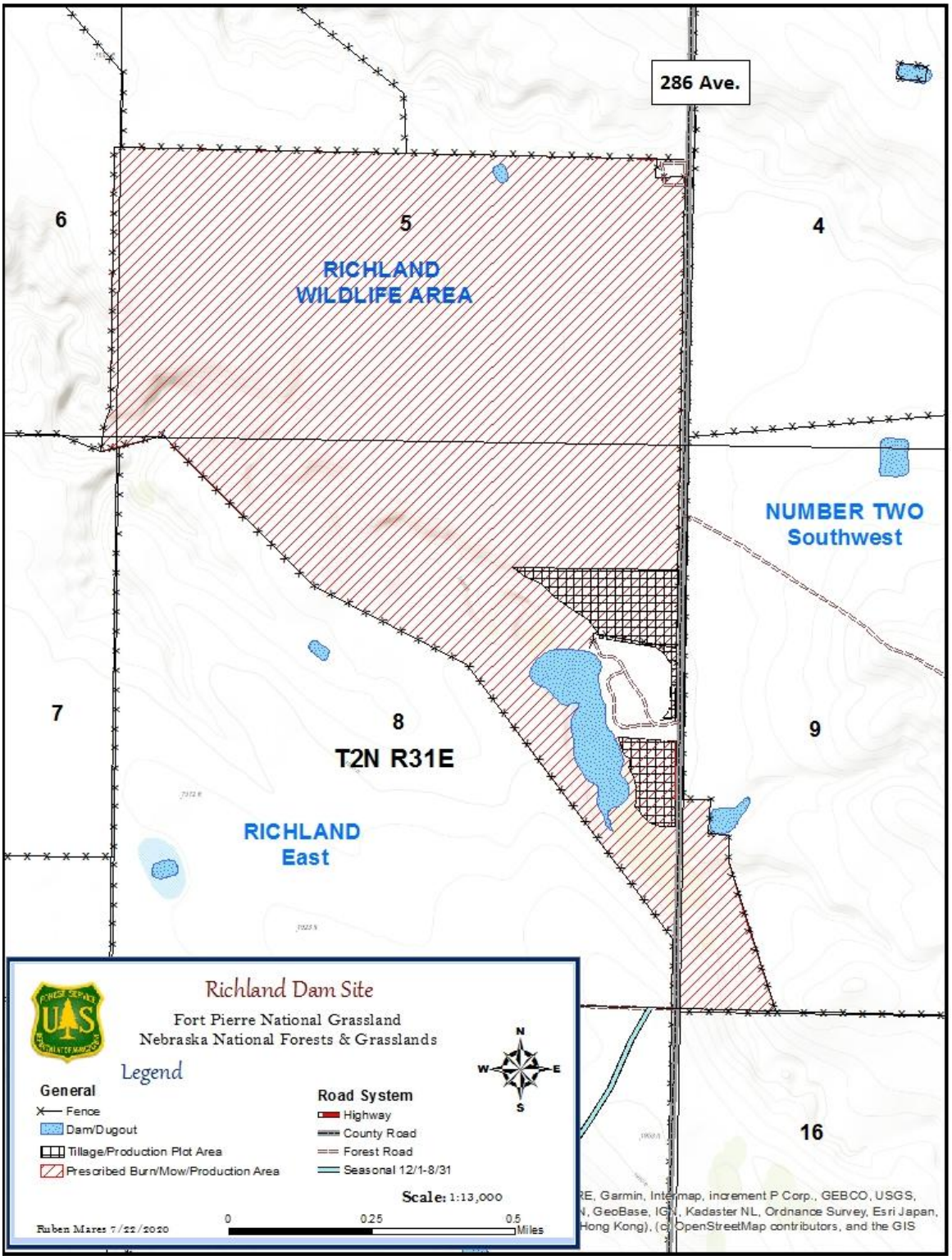

Figure 3. Map of proposed treatments at the Sheriff Dam Site of the Prairie Restoration Research Project, Fort Pierre National Grassland, Jones County, South Dakota. Figure by Ruben Mares.

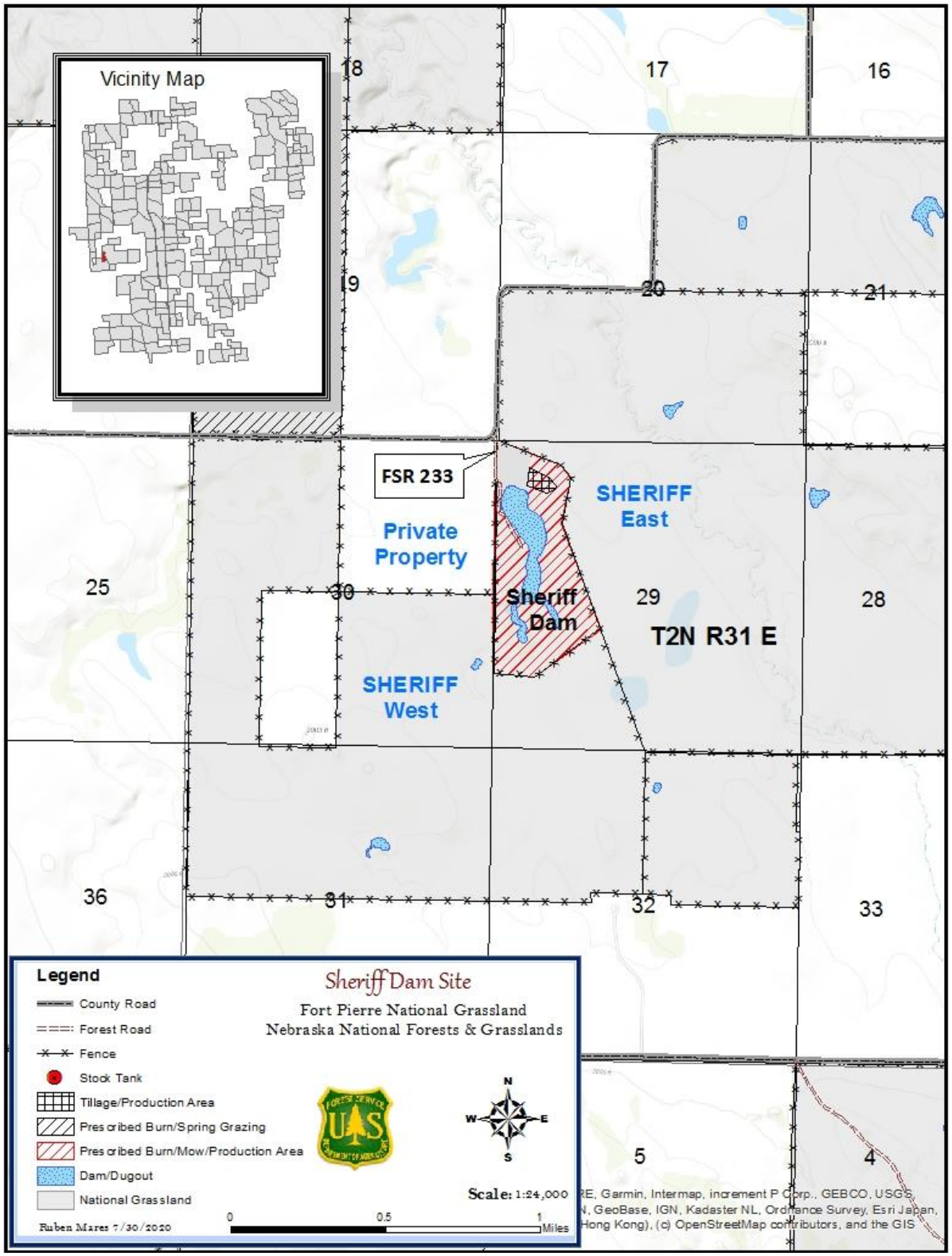

Figure 4. Map of proposed treatments at the American Creek North Site of the Prairie Restoration Research Project, Fort Pierre National Grassland, Lyman County, South Dakota. Figure by Ruben Mares.

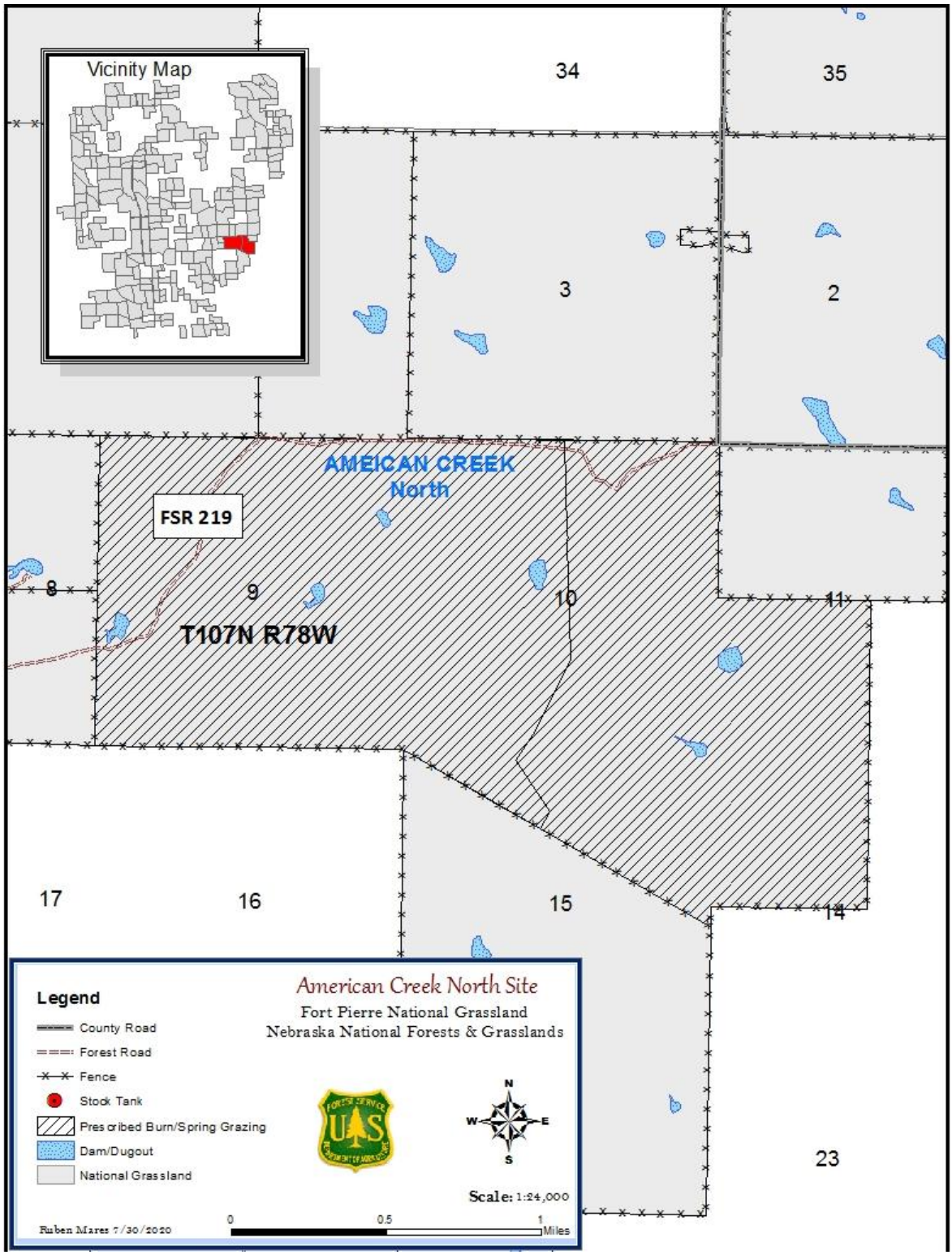

Figure 5. Map of proposed treatments at the Dry Hole #3 Site of the Prairie Restoration Research Project, Fort Pierre National Grassland, Lyman County, South Dakota. Figure by Ruben Mares.

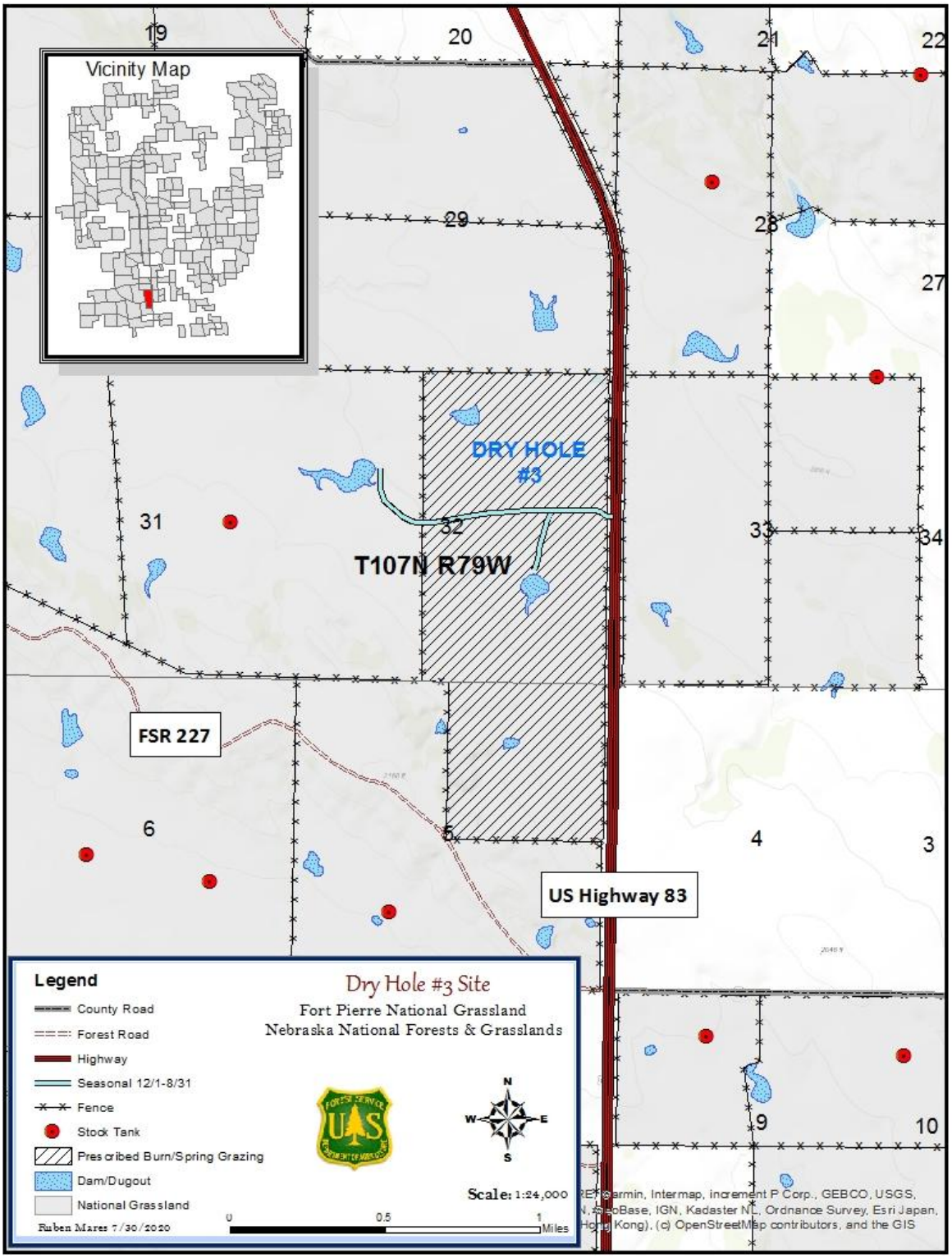

Figure 6. Map of proposed treatments at the Glenn Site of the Prairie Restoration Research Project, Fort Pierre National Grassland, Jones County, South Dakota. Figure by Ruben Mares.

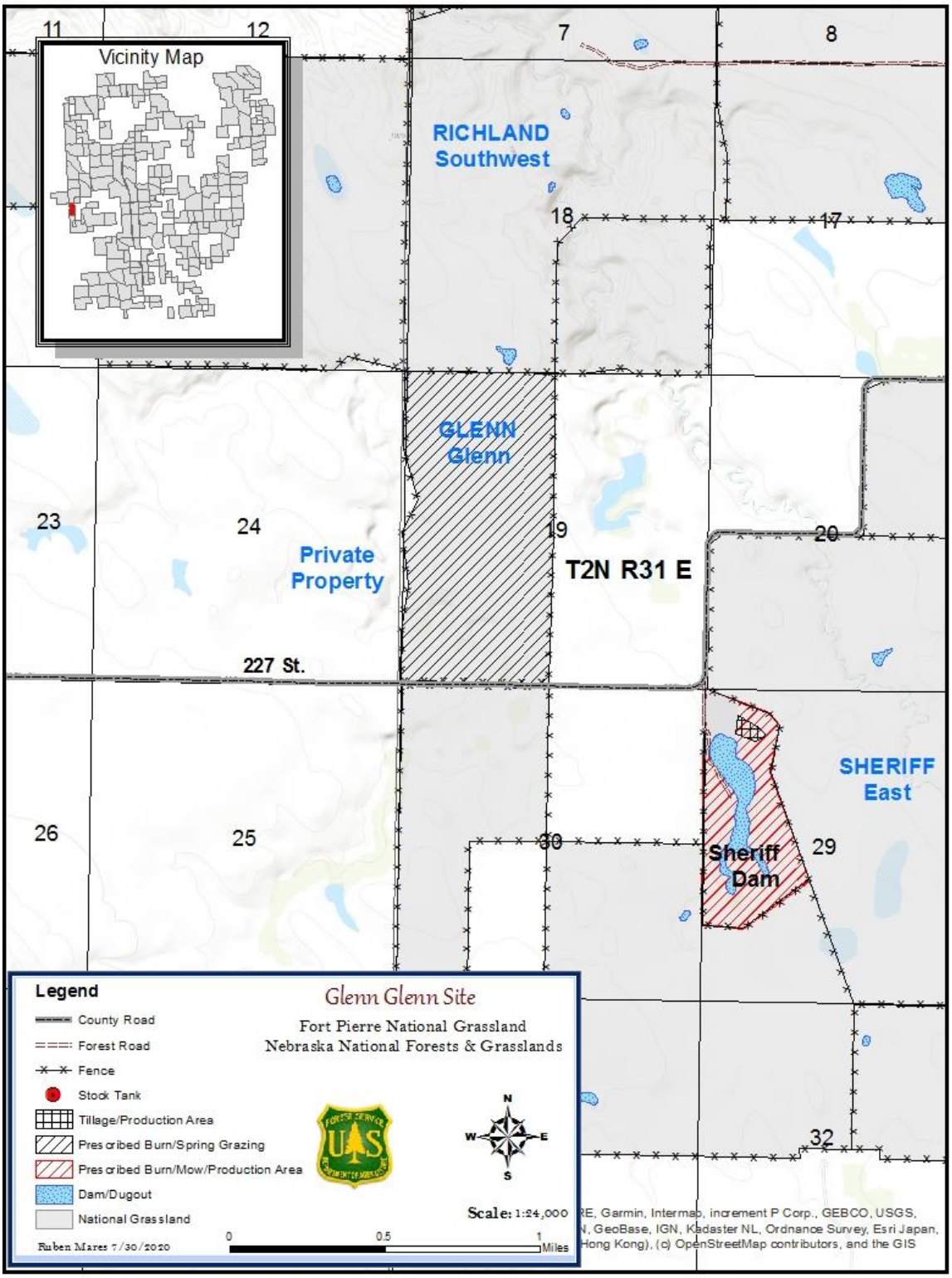

Figure 7. Map of proposed treatments at the Number Two Northeast Site of the Prairie Restoration Research Project, Fort Pierre National Grassland, Lyman County, South Dakota. Figure by Ruben Mares.

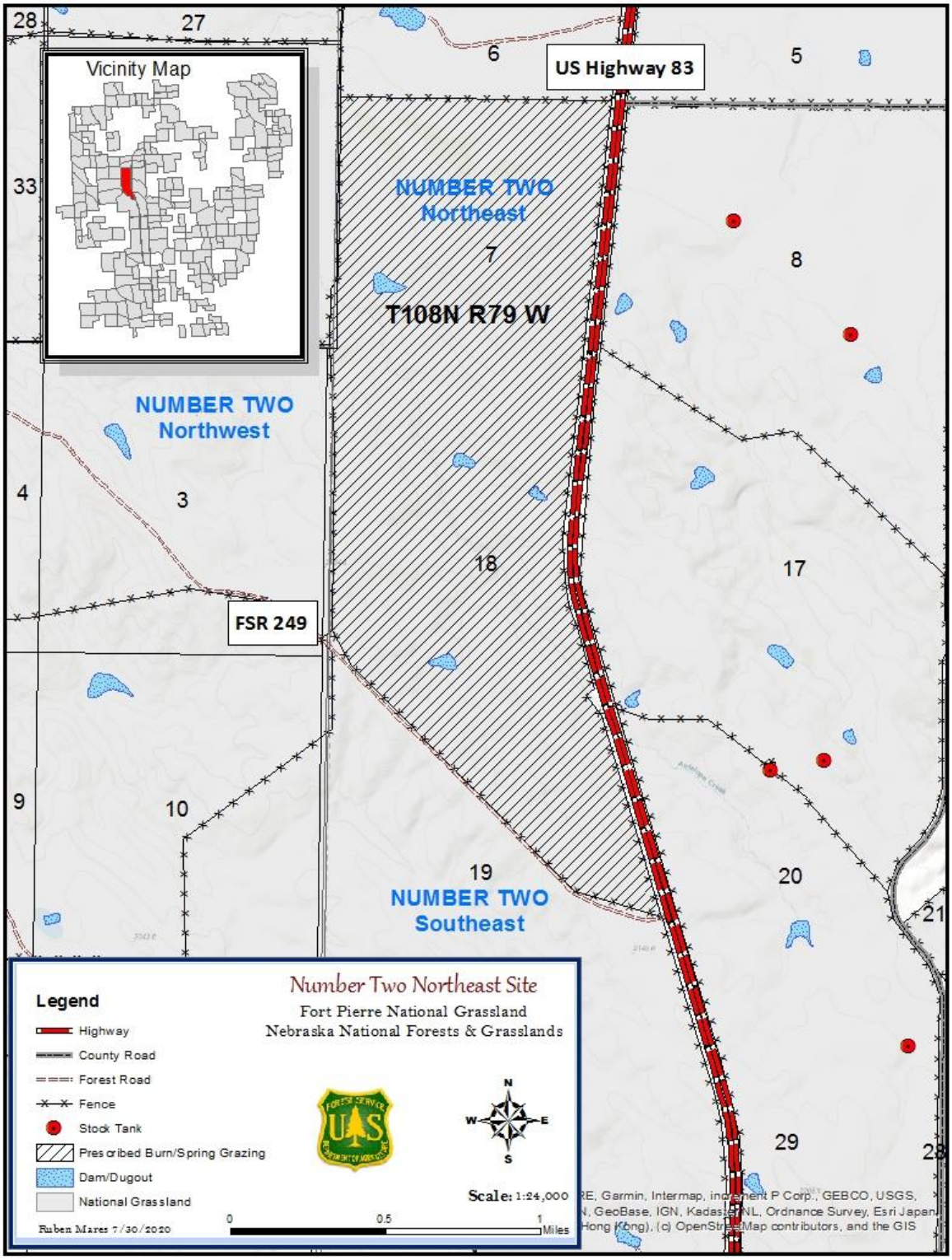

Figure 8. Map of proposed treatments at the Sioux West Site of the Prairie Restoration Research Project, Fort Pierre National Grassland, Lyman County, South Dakota. Figure by Ruben Mares.

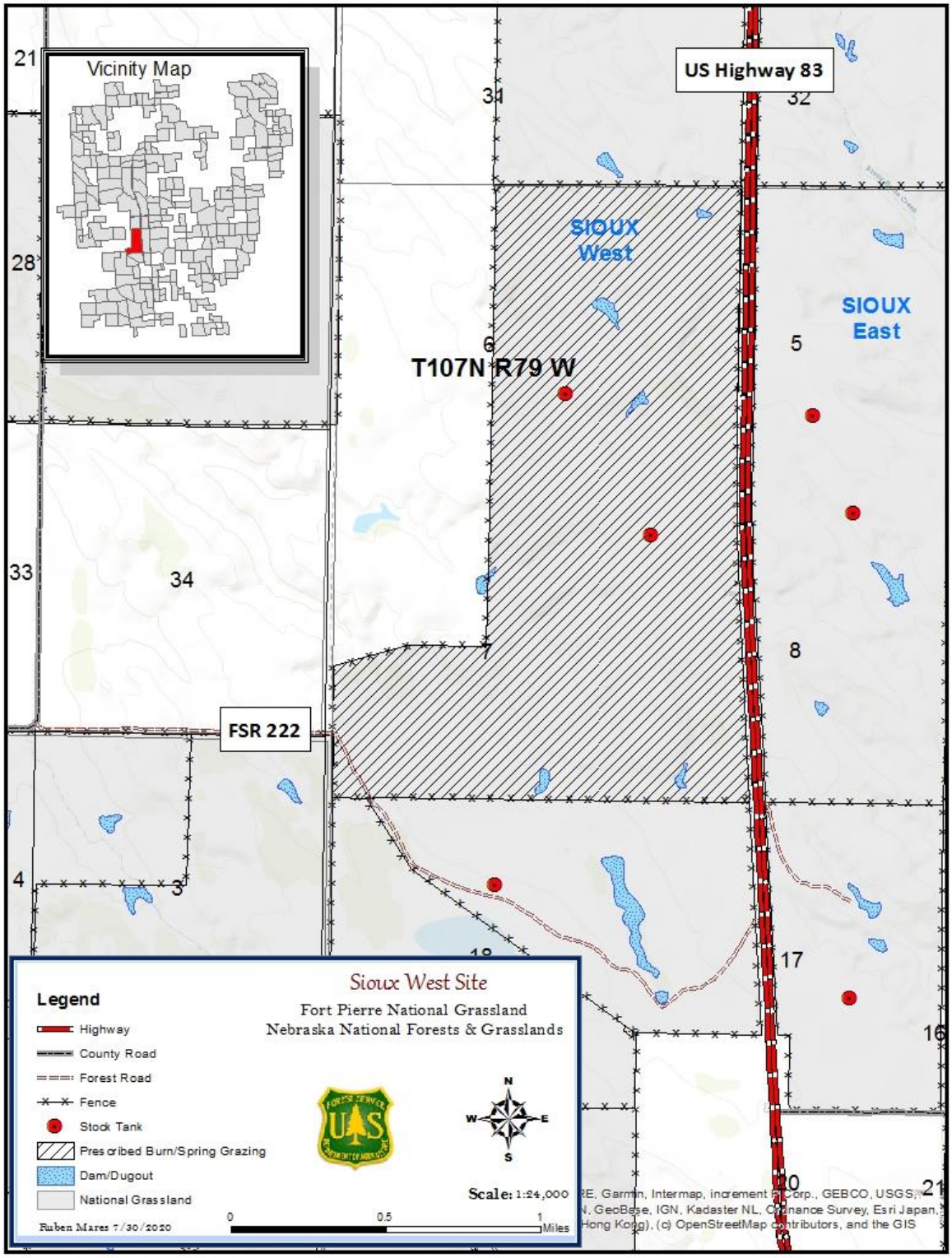

Figure 9. Map of proposed treatments at the West Engen Site of the Prairie Restoration Research Project, Fort Pierre National Grassland, Jones County, South Dakota. Figure by Ruben Mares.